

Our archivists compiled the following summary about Sharon Smith's Contraception Letter and experience at Middlebury based on background research. Please read The Campus article published within this item for further context. We also conducted our own interview with her, which you can find below.

Background Information

American Literature major Sharon Smith '68' was a junior at Middlebury when she wrote an anonymous letter about contraception and mailed it to every first year woman in the class of '71'. The academic year was '66-'67, prior to Roe v. Wade and before women were granted legal access to birth control. The letter discussed the methods of contraception step by step and included one male condom. Smith asked a couple of close male friends who were members of the Theta Chi fraternity—"a marijuana-smoking, acid-dropping, motorcycle-riding-up-and-down-the-stairs kinda place"—to purchase a large bin of condoms. She enclosed a condom in each envelope with a copy of the letter and sent them through the campus mail system, a couple at a time to avoid suspicion.

Smith had escaped an abusive family when she came to Middlebury, and risked being sent home if anyone found out she was the author. At this time at Middlebury, women had to wear skirts to dinner, and men wore jackets and ties. Women occupied the Battell side of College Street and had a curfew (men did not). The summer before her sophomore year of college, Smith entered into an affair with a man in New York. She visited him again for Thanksgiving break her sophomore fall. When Smith returned to campus after the break, she discovered she was pregnant and was forced to return home to California where she had no option but to live with her abusive father. Smith spent her time at home writing to old classmates from her California boarding school and traveling to San Francisco to try and convince doctors to give her an abortion. Abortion would not be legal for another eight years until 1973, when the Supreme Court passed its landmark Roe v. Wade decision. One day, while Smith was visiting a doctor, her father went through her mail and opened a letter that revealed her pregnancy. Her father found a doctor who owed him a favor, and Smith received hormonal injections which induced a miscarriage. The process was incredibly painful and Smith bled heavily for several days. Smith returned to Middlebury for her junior year, and one of the doctors she visited in San Francisco who had refused to give her an abortion, agreed to give her a prescription for birth control. She had the pills shipped to Middlebury and continued to have the prescription sent from California for many years. It was, in part, this experience that motivated Smith to educate younger women about their reproductive health. Finally in 1968 there was a doctor in Middlebury affiliated with Planned Parenthood who was willing to prescribe birth control.

Interview

Archivists: How would you describe Middlebury's campus culture during your time there? In terms of gender and race issues? Consent or sexual assault?

Sharon Smith: I grew up in Southern California, where "Sixties" culture began in the forties and fifties, so Middlebury was a culture shock. I applied Early Decision to lock in my escape from dangerous parents. I knew Midd was 3000 miles away and coed, I could get there by train (sounded like fun!), and Robert Frost hung around. (Between my application and arrival, passenger train service was halted and Robert Frost died.)

Sexism prevailed. I couldn't have applied to Harvard or Yale, for example. Until a few years after my graduation, Middlebury accepted only two girls for every three boys. We'd earned B+ to A grades; some boys had some B- grades and even a C or two. A lot of tact was required of girls dating insecure boys who weren't on our intellectual level.

The campus culture felt relentlessly white middle class. In California, I'd known many people who were Black, Hispanic, or Japanese. At Midd, I saw four Black students in four years and chatted with three of them; they seemed quite isolated. California acquaintances ranged from impoverished kids to kids whose parents were millionaires. At Midd, the boys I dated who had scholarships expressed a painful awareness of socio-cultural differences.

On the other hand, in California I'd overheard that wearing pink and green on a Thursday (Tuesday?) revealed that you were something called "a homo." At Midd, I chatted with two gay boys, learned a bit, and felt sorrow over the dangers they described. I gave a ride to a male classmate who was in shock after being seduced by a male professor; he assumed that meant he was now gay. Lesbians surely existed but were invisible to me.

Many girls wore matching sweater and skirt sets and penny loafers. Many or most were virgins. I grew my hair long, aimed to look sexy, gravitated to Theta Chi boys, and had sex Freshman year. I marched against the Vietnam War in Middlebury, NYC, and the Pentagon with TC boys and some other students.

Having not noticed "in loco parentis" in the Midd booklets, I assumed I'd be treated as an adult. But Ma Kelly (aka Dean of Women Elizabeth Kelly) locked the female side of campus in the 1950s. Girls mustn't drink but boys kept kegs in their dorms. It was girls' responsibility to control boys' sexual urges. Pregnant girls married and dropped out or were expelled; impregnators had a bright future to preserve, and mustn't be punished.

At my required Freshman meeting, innocently hoping for an ally, I told Ma Kelly my parents were at war with one another and with me; she told me I was a spoiled girl playing games to get my own way. I never dared to be honest with her again.

When I wrote an angry poem about my psychotic mother, Bob Pack said he knew I was not writing about my own mother. When I told Chaplain Scott what I endured at home he said, "I've never heard such a sad story. I have no idea at all how to help you. Come back any time."

Sophomore year, I spent Thanksgiving with a sweet girl who mourned the baby she'd had to give up for adoption. I didn't dare mention my abortion. Finding no emotional support at Midd, she soon left. I'll always miss her.

Also sophomore year, having read Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique*, I argued over lunch that females should have equal rights. A boy uttered what he and the others regarded as the perfect put-down: "That would mean the end of the double standard!" (I smiled and said "Yes, it would," for all the good that did.)

Junior year, an acquaintance showed me scars on her arms from "cutting." Apart from agreeing that incestuous fathers are awful, neither of us knew any way to heal. Another girl had symptoms that, looking back, might have been caused by a brain tumor. Ma Kelly told her "That's all in your head." When a girl was raped in town, for months all Midd girls were forbidden to be off-campus after dark; boys, of course, were not restricted.

Senior year, Midd hired a counselor and I soon went to his office asking for an appointment. His secretary said, "He's booked up for three months unless it's an emergency." My most recent traumatic personal events had happened two years earlier. I didn't list them for her, just decided they weren't "emergencies" and left. I was used to pushing through life though feeling depressed.

Also Senior year: a certain professor (not French, not Am Lit) who'd married and divorced at least one student, kept a statue of an erect penis on his office desk. Accustomed to casual male idiocies, I accepted his invitation to lunch. When I resisted his advances, he told me I was frigid, knelt in the gravel beside my car, and invited me to lie in bed with him: "I won't do anything." I responded, "Better move!" and backed out of the lot. He had to scramble to avoid getting clobbered by my car's open door.

In summary, when I arrived in 1964, Middlebury's campus culture in regard to gender, race, and politics was stuck in the mid-1950s. It did gradually progress. (Has it finally become liberal, or is it mired in conservatism?)

Archivists: How was “The Letter” received by students, faculty, and administration at the time?

Sharon Smith: I read the “Campus” newspaper article about “The Letter” but never dared discuss it. If I’d told a soul I wrote it, I’d have been expelled. I had no idea how its recipients viewed it. I recall hearing a few expressions of surprise from my own classmates. I probably widened my eyes, shook my head, chimed in with “Amazing!” and discreetly moved away.

Archivists: What was your experience of doing activist work that was anonymous? Did you have any mentors or allies? Did you see this as feminist activist work?

Sharon Smith: The Theta Chi guys I knew were supportive, but they would have been in major trouble if anyone found out they’d helped me. We mutually agreed never to speak of it.

The only other “active” thing I did was a survey of girls in every year about the rules they’d broken. A professor helped with the statistics. It was my idea, but I think the Campus article described me as assisting a boy I’d asked to help a bit.

The concept of “activism” per se was foreign to Midd culture, as far as I knew. I never heard or read about feminism’s second wave while I was there, and was unaware of any cluster of young women interested in “activist issues.”

I was “an activist” in regard to the anti-Vietnam War movement. However, males placed themselves firmly in its leadership positions, pushing me away whenever they thought I threatened their status even in minor ways like expressing my opinions in public.

I bet Dr. Marjorie Lamberti would [have] been supportive. Her Modern European History course was fabulous! I wish I’d dared to share my enthusiasms with her. My habit of silence had been ingrained at age 10, when I instantly learned I must not tell anyone what I saw and felt during Grammy’s sudden death.

I really enjoyed dabbling in philosophy, art, science, psychology, history, sociology, anthropology, French, music, and so on. I gained the liberal arts education that all Americans need. I’d majored in American Literature because I planned to be an American author, but we mostly studied the work of middle-aged white males who often belittled girls and women. I kept my head down, passed every course with decent grades, and graduated.

Archivists: What were the best and worst parts of doing this work?

Sharon Smith: Best? The satisfaction of putting information about human reproduction into the hands of younger women, potentially protecting them from traumas I’d endured. Worst? My terror of being expelled, having to love with my father, and being raped from age 18 to age 21. Sex abuse laws might as well have been nonexistent back then, and he was an attorney.

Archivists: Were there other feminist issues you were involved in on campus?

Sharon Smith: Thanks to my pre-Midd lifetime of isolation, I attended classes and studied. Period.

When I was a child, my grandparents were in their 70s and 80s and their home was my sanctuary. I'd just turned 10 and was alone with Grammy when she suddenly died. My grandfather died when I was 12 and had lived with him for a few months.

My mother had no friends and never left the house; my stepfather went out to buy groceries and get drunk. I didn't dare invite classmates home. I spent thankfully rare visits with my father and stepmother dancing away from his lust, ideally without enraging him.

I experienced those four parents' psychiatric illnesses and behavior as my own shame, and kept their secrets. Friend-making requires some personal sharing, so I had a few female acquaintances but no friends. A series of boyfriends would provide a bit of cuddling and conversation in exchange for sex.

I turned 18 the July before sophomore year. In August my stepfather killed himself and I finally managed to get my mother committed to the state psychiatric hospital for medication and surgery. In October she died of sepsis. In November I fell pregnant. Over Christmas a beating, attempted rape, and nearly bleeding out on the bathroom floor were the prices I paid my father for the abortion he arranged. Then he set an attack dog on me, watched me bleed from the ear and arm, and chuckled.

A few weeks after graduation, I turned 21 and was legally an adult. I enrolled in grad school and made sure he never found me.

Were "Feminist issues" discussed at Midd between 1964 and 1968? As you can now see, I was too isolated to know. But in 1969, when a feminist called Carrol Hanisch created the term "the personal is political," I was one of millions of women aware of having been embroiled in sexual politics our entire lives, without expressly having identified every issue as feminist.

Archivists: Have you continued to engage in work around issues of reproductive health after your time at Middlebury? Other feminist activist work?

Sharon Smith: I started teaching our daughters about sex and reproduction when each was three. I read books to them, discussed issues, offered contraceptives, and told them that if they became pregnant I'd support whatever choice they made. We cheered when Roe passed and raged when Dobbs was forced upon American girls and women.

Personal and professional activism:

My first MA was in Cinema at USC, around 1974. Though I'd hoped to become an editor, being female precluded any employment in the film industry apart from "continuity." So I researched female involvement filmmaking for my thesis. In 1975, it was published in hardcover and paperback as *Women Who Make Movies*. Some film students wrote to tell me it was inspiring, but to me it was more of a farewell.

You could call me an activist mother. Both daughters had physical problems. One additionally had early signs of autism and the other has DiGeorge Syndrome. The original diagnosis for both was Inept Mother. After years of intense research and taking each girl to multiple doctors, each received an accurate diagnosis and had surgery. Psychological healing took even longer. Around 1991, I earned an M.Ed. But cash-poor districts would hire only new teachers with a BA and a few feared my computer skills. I demonstrated children's car seats for a living until age 45, when I decided to become a neuropsychologist. The man then heading the University of Maine Psychology Department laughed me out of his office ("You're my age!"), so I earned my doctorate out of state. I devoted my career to impoverished clients with MaineCare (Medicaid) for insurance.

I think my determination to keep pushing against sexism was a form of "feminist activism," though many women who hate the very notion of feminism also do this. And when I consider Maine's lack of neuropsychologists and the salaries earned by my colleagues who see only self-pay clients, I regard the neuropsych career itself as a type of activism.

Archivists: When did you first tell people that you were the author of "The Letter?" How did people react and how did it feel to reveal this?

Sharon Smith: I never bothered to mention it until the 50th reunion. Classmates who remembered it seemed pleased. While composing my personal summary for our reunion book I thought, "Oh, what the fuck," shed all my ancient secrets, and tossed shame aside (if you happen to find some shame lying around, don't pick it up!).

Archivists: What did you learn from this experience? What advice would you give to Middlebury activists today?

Sharon Smith: Unanswerable questions. I will say this, though:

In 1947, my grandmother hired a woman to raise me and try to help my psychotic mother. I bonded with "T"—my true mother—and her husband "Daddybug." Born Black in Mississippi in 1903, they'd grown into wise and kindly adults in circumstances far worse than anything I could encounter (I'm middle class and white).

Growing up, I visited them as often as I could. When my biological mother died (1965), they built a second bedroom onto their cinderblock house in the Mojave Desert and informally

adopted me. After my Middlebury graduation (1968) I flew West to my first real home. “T” and “Daddybug” died in 1973; they’d saved my life.

And they approved of Randy Huber, a Vietnam vet like so many of that era’s men, Cinema student, and feminist who in 1970 became my very close friend. We married in 1973, moved to Maine, and are still here, still in love.

I’ve spent my life learning how to be a good person and trying to help others, and have a partner who shares these values. So I suppose I’d tell everyone, whether or not they regard themselves as activists, to do their best to do that.

Archivists: You mentioned your survey of the rules female students broke while on campus. What prompted this research and what did you find? Was this for a class or on your own time?

Sharon Smith: It was on my own time. Have you explored the college's own archives? There's at least one folder containing things I sent them when I was downsizing. Tons of things, dating back to 1964. The archivists talked to me at some length during my 50th reunion. I'm pretty sure a copy of the original survey questions is there, and very likely also the "Campus" article written after the results were published.

Essentially, while at Midd I broke as many rules as I felt necessary to be able to behave as an adult within an institution that was determined to force girls growing into women to remain, essentially, children. One day (junior year? maybe senior year?) I wondered if I was the only one doing that. It occurred to me that times were changing across the country, and maybe the prissy attitudes I’d confronted in girls in Battell freshman year were changing, too. Perhaps many girls/women had been pushing back against the rules, just as I’d been doing. And that’s what I found—less rule-breaking when they were freshmen, lots more by the time they were seniors. They were breaking more rules every year. This was not universally true, but I found it encouraging.

Archivists: You talked about participating in the anti-Vietnam War movement, which you described as a very male-dominated sphere. Were there other women participating in this movement? How did you and/or other women navigate sexism within the movement?

Sharon Smith: Keep in mind that I was quite isolated. That said, yes, some other women participated in the anti-war movement. One was Lassie Dudley, but I have no idea what class she was in or even if that was her first name or a nickname. But I was the only one identifying as a feminist I happened to know. I never spoke to or overheard any woman who appeared to think in terms of “navigating sexism.”

Sometimes pushing against sexist attitudes worked, sometimes it didn't. We just participated as best we could in the ways available to us. Mostly, for me, it was just a matter of driving or riding from VT to DC or NYC while talking about politics, demonstrating in DC or NYC, and driving or riding back again. Some of us also joined the march between the college and the Congo church.

Exception: I was part of some sort of anti-war drive that took place in front of Proctor Hall. Guys were handing out fliers and talking to people. I talked to a couple of people, too, but a guy saw me (caught me?) and told me in no uncertain terms to shut up or leave. I stayed just a while longer, and left.

You should check the Midd archives--also the NYT. A few years ago someone at Midd contacted me regarding a form I'd recently completed for the NYT, which had asked for memories of Vietnam-era protests and published mine. Midd wanted to make sure I had actually protested at the Pentagon. I assured them, in great detail, that I did. I suspect they were horrified, since that fact barged up against the college's efforts to persuade "conservative"(retrogressive) alumni that Midd students are and always have been placid right-wingers.

Archivists: You touched on the isolation experienced by poor and Black students, as well as tensions on campus around socioeconomic issues. Was this something that was talked about? Was there any activism on campus regarding race or class?

Sharon Smith: If there was "activism," I was unaware of it. I didn't hear or overhear or participate in much "discussion." I don't know how poor and/or Black students felt. The Black Theta Chi boys I knew were aware that a beloved Black couple back in California had helped raise me, I'd visited them on vacation once my mother died, and planned to move in with them after graduation. In chatting with these boys, I felt deeply sad and entirely unable to say or do anything that might help.

My first boyfriend, freshman year, was deeply troubled about being a kid from a public school in a NYC borough, and ostentatiously spread honey on a knife and ate cooked peas from it at Proctor. I still don't believe he was telling the truth when he said that was how he was brought up to eat peas. Looking back, I wonder if he was riffing on this:

I Eat My Peas with Honey (By Anonymous)

I eat my peas with honey;

I've done it all my life.

It makes the peas taste funny,

But it keeps them on the knife.[1]

The only thing I actually did that even remotely qualifies as being "active" was to spend Thanksgiving at the home of the Black girl I knew from the Château. I forget which state she lived in. Her parents owned a BBQ-type restaurant serving southern dishes, which were familiar to me from visiting T and Daddybug. They served collard greens, which I'd eaten before; I admitted I don't really like much (we ate in the restaurant kitchen). She and I spent a lot of time laughing, giggling, and playing 45 rpm records and dancing a bit in their living room. I doubt any other white girl in my era did that, apart from a girl (I think not a classmate) who was dating a foreign student who was Black.

By the way... In my original responses to your questions, I forgot to mention that in the very early 1970s, while in the Cinema MA program at USC, I participated in Women For Equality in Media in Los Angeles. We demonstrated at the gate of Graystone Mansion, which was being leased to the American Film Institute, a then notoriously sexist regime that heavily favored male filmmakers and excluded most or all female filmmakers. We demanded equal participation there. I recall news cameras filming us, and an article published somewhere. The AFI finally sent someone down to promise they'd change. We dispersed. Of course they didn't change at all.